



Having Other Possibilities Exist
2 Corinthians 12:7-10
August 12, 2018

I've been thinking about this scripture passage since May. At that time, another school shooting happened in Santa Fe, TX. 10 dead. And I thought about despair. What brings people to such despair that they shoot others and then themselves?

This summer there were 3 high profile suicides: Kate Spade, Anthony Bordain, and we just learned that the death of Margot Kidder, who played Lois Lane alongside Christopher Reeve's Superman, was suicide.

It concerns me that there is so much despair. Maybe you are experiencing despair, or you know someone who is. How do we fight despair, the lack of hope, in our world, in our own lives?

Our scripture passage today is about someone who was close to despair: the Apostle Paul. This passage has intrigued people for years. Paul talks about his "thorn in the flesh." Paul never defined this thorn in the flesh, so people have speculated over the years.

Some say it was an illness such as malaria or leprosy. Others claimed that Paul struggled with depression. Some suggest he had an eye disease because he couldn't see very well. Still others think it was all the persecution he faced. Whatever it was, it brought a great torment into Paul's life. Three times, Paul asked God to remove it. Each time, God said no. That could lead to despair.

Then there is something even more strange in this passage. Paul says Satan gave him this thorn in the flesh that tormented him.

We Presbyterians don't talk much about satan. We are too rational for that! Yet, scripture teaches the existence of a satan, a devil, something evil. Here is satan's role: Satan doesn't so much make us do bad things, rather tempts us to despair, to undermine our hope, to keep us away from God.

Think about the temptations of Jesus by satan in the wilderness. Jesus wasn't tempted to do bad things. He was tempted to leave God and not follow God's will for his life. Satan tempted him to walk away from what Jesus was called to do...to go to the cross.

There was a movie about Christ that came out quite a few years ago that caused quite a stir, especially among Christians. It was called "The Last Temptation of Christ." In this movie, the temptation for Jesus was to not go to the cross. The movie as a whole is really not a very good movie, but it has an interesting scene in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus is praying and asking God to keep him from the cross. The movie has Satan show up and try to talk Jesus out of going to the cross...come on, Jesus, walk away, settle down...get married and have a family.

Sometimes I wonder if Satan was there in that Garden. The Bible doesn't say Satan was there, but it does say that Jesus was under such stress that he sweat drops of blood...which apparently can happen when stress is enormous. Talk about despair.

So now that I have brought you all into despair, let's get out of it, shall we? How do we fight the despair, the lack of hope?

I talked about satan because the first the way to fight despair is to recognize where it comes from and why. Once we know who is the author of despair and that satan does it to keep us from God, then the way to fight it is to keep coming back to God.

I wonder if God said the same thing to Jesus in the Garden as what God said to Paul in our passage today. As Paul asked God to take away the torment, God said, “My grace is sufficient for you.”

Several years ago, a friend of mine gave me her definition of Hope. It’s the title of my message today: Having Other Possibilities Exist. Notice that the first letter of each word in this title spells the word “HOPE.” In the midst of despair we are given hope in the existence of another possibility: My grace is sufficient for you. And what is this grace? It is the ever-present, ever-lasting love of God. We don’t earn it, we don’t deserve. It is just there, given to us as a gift.

Because of this, the Apostle Paul was able to say, whenever I am weak, then I am strong. Whenever Paul is weak, he remembers that the greatest of all powers belong to God. The power to heal, the power to forgive, the power to renew, the power to inspire, the power to create, the power to love — all of these things come from God.

Paul explains this power in terms of grace – ever-present, everlasting love of God. And it’s not just grace: it’s sufficient grace. It is enough.

Keep coming back to God, my friends, because God’s grace is sufficient. Lean on that grace for it leads us out of despair.

This past week, I returned from 4 weeks off – 2 weeks study leave, 2 weeks vacation. During this time away, I learned something very important. I came to the realization that I had been making my work here at the church my life. I know that sounds like a really great thing a pastor should say. But the problem was my priorities were mixed up.

I learned that I was putting my work here in the church above my relationship with God. And when we pastors do that, it can easily lead to despair because we are depending on the church rather than the sufficient grace of God.

Here is what happened that got my priorities mixed up: over the past several years, I had developed the morning habit of getting up, feeding Barnes, my

hungry cat, making a cup of chai tea latte, then sitting at my computer and going through emails, and reading the digital version of my home town newspaper. Then if I had any time left over, I spent it in prayer and scripture reading. As you can imagine, that time was often not available.

Then during my time off this past month, I reconnected with family and friends. I wanted to make those relationships a priority. And when I did, I came to the realization that I was not making my relationship with God a priority. I needed to make my relationship with God more important than my work as a pastor.

So now, when I get up in the morning, I feed my hungry cat, make a cup of chai tea latte, then sit on the couch with my Bible, a devotional, my cat on my lap and spend time with God. When finished, I journal what I said to God and what God said. Then if I have time, I read my email and digital newspaper.

Stay connected to God, my friends. Keep working on that relationship. I believe this is the way to combat despair because God's grace is sufficient for you. I was having a conversation this past week with several women, and we talked about hard things in our lives. And we wondered how people without God make it through life.

In Henri Nouwen's book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, he says, "Somehow I have become accustomed to living with sadness, and so have lost the eyes to see the joy and the ears to hear the gladness that belongs to God and which is to be found in the hidden corners of the world."

Nouwen tells of a friend who has the ability to see joy in everything. "Instead of recounting stories of difficult economic situations in the countries he visited, or about the great injustices or the pain he has seen, he tells about the hidden joys he has discovered. He tells about a man, woman or child who brought him hope and peace. He tells about little groups of people who are faithful to each other in the midst of all the turmoil. He tells about the small wonders of God."

This is a way to combat despair: looking for the small wonders of God.

I have a story to tell you of someone I know who has been discovering the small wonders of God. While in Minneapolis several weeks ago, I spent a day with a friend I have known my whole life: we grew up across street from one another. Last Fall, her 33 year old daughter died suddenly and unexpectedly. The family was thrown into deep grief.

As we met over lunch, I asked her to talk about what life has been like since her daughter's death. She spent the next 3 hours telling how God has been making His presence known with the family through small wonders, through the sufficient grace of God.

The number 22 has been a recurring number for the family since Angela's death. It started the week she died, and the 2s came up so often, they began to tie it to Angela and to God. For example, the family took a trip last March to Disney World. Their flight number was 2283. The number 22, and 83 was the year Angela was born.

Their hotel room was 1101 – Angela's birthday was Nov 1...11 01. They were given a key card for their hotel room. It was purple – the favorite color of Angela (In fact, the family all wore purple the day of her funeral). Not only was the key card purple, which reminded them of Angela, it said "It's time to let me go."

This past summer, the family sold Angela's house. As they cleaned out the house getting it ready for sale, they found angel Christmas tree ornaments in random places throughout the house. One was found in the bottom of a garment bag, another was found wrapped up in newspaper in a punch bowl. Please note that Angela's name is the word "angel" with an "a" at the end.

My friend showed me the angels. And then she showed me a Bible they found while cleaning out Angela's house. It was given to Angela when she was a teenager. I opened the Bible and read the date it was given to her: Sept 16.

Angela died on the same date: Sept 16.

And a small wonder that just happened several days ago. The family bought a new car. The mileage: 222. "And so it continues," my friend texted me.

This family was noticing the small wonders of God, and God reminding them, over and over again, of that constant Presence everyday: the sufficient grace of God carrying this family through terrible grief, and keeping them from despair.

When we stay connected to God, we, too, can begin to see these small wonders of God, the sufficient grace of God that gives us other possibilities, that keeps us from despair and gives us hope. And makes us strong.

Our task is to carry the sufficient grace of God into our own world.

I still remember watching the news after the Boston Marathan bombing five years ago. Anderson Cooper was interviewing a pastor on a Sunday. "What did you tell your congregation this morning?" Anderson asked her.

She said, "I told them I didn't know why this evil happened, but I do know this: that out of the despair, hope rises up."

Several days ago, I went to visit one of our members in a care facility in town. She told about a visit from one of our members. She showed me the flowers this person brought, the card this person signed, and she told me how they spent time together talking and laughing. It helped relieve her despair.

This was the sufficient grace of God being extended to others in a very visible, concrete way. Psalm 27 says: "I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Our task is to continually stay in relationship with God, to know of the sufficient grace of God, to look for the small wonders of God, and help others experience that sufficient grace, too.

Amen.

